

When Capt. Meriwether Lewis and Lt. William Clark set off from the mouth of the Missouri River to explore the West and Pacific Northwest in 1804, it took them 20 days to reach what now is Jefferson City, Mo. Today, travelers can take Amtrak from St. Louis to Jefferson City in about two and one-half hours.

Riding the Rails with Lewis and Clark

By Kathy White

Photography by Gary Reinhart



William Clark



Meriwether Lewis

Fortunately for today's explorers, the trip covers some of the same territory. Better still, the National Park Service and Amtrak have teamed up to tell people about this chapter of Missouri's rich heritage.

As part of the program, Park Service volunteers ride the rails from St. Louis to Jefferson City and back again. While aboard, they talk about the early days of Lewis and Clark's Corps of Discovery expedition to anyone who's interested.



Two of the program's 47 volunteers are L.H. "Doc" and Earline Darrow, a retired couple from O'Fallon, Mo. Doc and Earline average about a trip a month during the winter, but anticipate more journeys when the program goes daily after Memorial Day.



Mike Corns, Trails and Rails program coordinator for the National Park Service, and Earline Darrow, Park Service volunteer, aboard Amtrak's Jefferson City-St. Louis train.

They're easy to spot boarding the train with their suitcase full of artifacts and Doc wearing his tall, beaver-felt hat. Once the train gets rolling, Doc heads out from the café car and roams the aisles with the hat on his

head and an animal pelt draped across his shoulder. If people ask questions – and they always do – he'll stop and talk on the spot or invite them back to the café car.

The Darrows make a great tag-team. Doc's the talker; Earline's usually his back-up. As he goes on about the early days of the expedition, she often keeps him on track by pointing out their location along the route and passing around the artifacts.

The job is more challenging than it appears, Earline says. In addition to having to pay attention to visual cues outside the train windows, cues that change with the seasons, she also has to track Doc's narrative and keep the flow of artifacts moving.

"You have to remember which direction the train is going to keep your cues straight," Earline says. "Also, you don't talk about the Missouri River on the left when it's on the right."

Doc, Earline and the other Park Service volunteers get their basic script and the props from Mike Corns, this route's Trails and Rails program coordinator for the National Park Service. Corns, a native St. Louisan, thought of the local program, wrote the script and got it approved by the Park Service and Amtrak.

The Lewis and Clark presentation on the Missouri route is unique. The rest of the Park Service's 11 programs are on Amtrak's long-haul routes like Chicago to Seattle, which features information on the better-known parts of the Lewis and Clark expedition. Corns' program is the only one to take advantage of a short but scenic route that's packed with history. Plus, Amtrak's corridor along the Missouri River frequently gets history buffs closer to the route than travelers who try to trace it by automobile.

Corns said the teamwork between the Amtrak staff and the volunteers makes the program successful.

William Clark's diary



Doc shares facts about Lewis and Clark's Missouri adventures – along the same route the Amtrak travelers are riding.

"When we started, no one knew quite what to expect, but now they love us," he says. "A lot of the time, the Amtrak crews coming out of Illinois or Kansas City start talking up our presentation. By the time the volunteers board, the café car is full of people ready for the show."

And what a show it is. Doc and Earline have a lot to say about the Corps of Discovery's adventures along the route the Amtrak riders are experiencing. They pass around artifacts that mesh with the conversation. Adults, Doc says, are more interested in the history. The children just enjoy playing with the props, which include beaver, river otter and skunk pelts; chunks of galena, the state mineral, and others Lewis and Clark collected along the journey; and replicas of coins and medallions they gave to native Americans as tokens of friendship of the United States government.

Doc and Earline also display and discuss posterboards with pictures, quotes and facts about the expedition, its keelboat and pirogues, and the Louisiana Purchase. And, of course, everyone gets a kick out of Doc's snazzy beaver-felt top hat.

The National Park Service Trails and Rails program about the early days of the Corps of Discovery is conducted on weekends only, now through Memorial Day, on westbound train 301 between St. Louis and Jefferson City and eastbound train 304 between Jefferson City and St. Louis. After that, the programs will be offered daily, through Labor Day. National Park pass holders can save five percent on train fares thanks to a special Amtrak-National Park Service discount. Call (800) USA-RAIL (872-7245) for details.





Kids get a kick out of trying on and playing with volunteers' props during their trip.

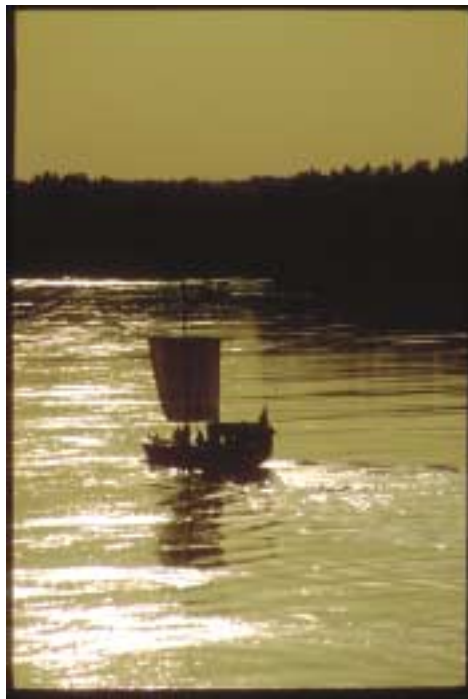
"Not many kids can resist trying on the hat or touching the furs. Their eyes light up," he says.

Doc says the unexpected nature of the presentation makes it special.

"Most people get on the train prepared to entertain themselves or sleep," he notes. "Now they close their books or laptops and listen to us."

The presentation focuses on the early days of the Lewis and Clark expedition. That was a critical period, Doc and Earline explain, because the Corps' 40-plus men became a cohesive unit. The waters of the Missouri were treacherous at times and the explorers frequently walked the banks, pulling their three boats. The experiences hardened the men and prepared them for the rougher passages ahead.

Although trappers had used the Missouri River for quite some time, the Corps of Discovery was the first scientific journey. The men collected samples of the native flora and fauna. They charted where the major rivers, like the Osage, flowed into the Missouri. Lewis and Clark also served as President Thomas Jefferson's first ambassadors to the native populations.



Corns' materials are full of similarly fascinating information, Doc says. The key is being flexible in how to use it.

"Mike insists we be accurate, but other than that, we have a lot of leeway in what we say and how we say it," Doc explains. "If someone wants to talk about how Lewis and Clark traveled, that's what we focus on. If they want to learn more about the purpose of the expedition, we talk about that. We

can talk about the indigenous peoples or Daniel Boone. We even talk about the heritage and culture of the towns we pass."

Along with sharing Missouri history, it's the personal moments that touch the volunteers the most. For example, a group of travelers from India loved the presentation, but was most concerned that the "Missus" was standing, Doc says.

Riding the rails seems to bring back civility in travel, he adds.

"It harkens back to a bygone day when this was the main form of travel. People are more friendly and open on the train," he says.

Want proof? Earline tells the story of Doc's 65th birthday, which he marked by volunteering to present the Trails and Rails program. The café car attendant and some of the children in the car circulated an Amtrak postcard among the passengers and presented the "birthday card" to Doc.

"It was a sweet moment," she says.

So, for a unique look at history and an entertaining experience, ride the rails with Lewis and Clark. Doc, Earline and all the other National Park Service volunteers promise you'll have a great – and comfortable – adventure. ■

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Meriwether Lewis' telescope